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Chief, Publications Staff

16 May 1956

Chief, Materials Division

Comments on Research Aid Entitled "The Writing of Reports"

1. Subject Research Aid is a comprehensive, detailed, and carefully considered piece of work which should prove of substantial value to D/M analysts.

2. I should like to suggest, however, that the effort to make the Aid an outstanding specimen of its kind may have led to excessive length and to what might be called an over-development of exposition. Examples of what I have in mind are the second complete paragraph on page 11, and the two paragraphs beginning with the last paragraph on page 20.

3. It seems to me that some of the sections will prove to be considerably more useful to D/M analysts than others. For example, Section V-7, "Tables and Tabulations," Section V-8, "Footnotes and Documentation," Section V-9, "Foreign Words, Phrases, Names, and Terms," and Section V-10, "Graphics," should be extremely useful. By contrast, some portions of Section VI, "Some Writing Problems and Pitfalls," will be less useful, as for example, the sections on "Provincialisms," "Anglicisms," "Archaisms," etc. The reason is that the improper use of these expressions has very little effect on the overall quality of a report. Any errors can easily be corrected at the St/PB level. I do not mean to imply that errors of the kind discussed should be cavalierly overlooked. I do mean to suggest that the price paid in terms of space required in the Research Aid is probably greater than is warranted by the practical consequence of misuse.

4. Another excellent example of sections which will be particularly useful are those on the active and passive voices and on sentences and paragraphs. I feel strongly that one of the greatest blights on our writing is caused by the indiscriminate use of the passive voice at the expense of both clarity and ease of reading. Likewise, many analysts do not know what constitutes a complete sentence or a complete paragraph.

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5. The section on "Common Troublemakers," I feel, is less useful than some of the other parts of the work. Errors of the kind discussed here constitute, of course, an offense against good English usage. Nonetheless, they do not create serious damage to a paper and can easily be corrected at the St/PB level.

6. To sum all this up, this Research Aid has the virtues both of a scholarly dissertation on language and of a practical guide to writing in ERA. Both of these contributions are significant and important. I believe, however, that as analysts who use writing as a tool, we are more concerned with the latter contribution than the former.

7. Additional detailed comments are as follows: (a) The first sentence of the introduction states, "The purpose of the reports of the Economic Research Area of the Office of Research and Reports (ORR) is to provide finished economic intelligence for the use of the intelligence community." I trust that in fact our consumers are not confined to the intelligence community and that we are not in fact engaged in taking in each others' washing. (b) It is suggested that you compare the comments about the table of contents contained on page 6 with the comments about the relationship of a table of contents and the body of the report at the top of page 8. (c) The author of the example on page 60 beginning with the words "Care should be taken . . ." deserves the highest commendation for superb ingeniousness in the choice of words. Please do not change, for we have an ORR classic in the making.

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P.S.

I note that your covering memorandum of April 30 uses the word "despatch" in the second sentence of paragraph 3. Naturally, I consulted my Webster's. I discovered that Webster calls despatch "A variant of dispatch," and was properly confounded that you had used a variant. On further thought, I concluded that this word was deliberately placed in the memo as a booby trap. No doubt you have an Oxford Universal in reserve which will completely confound my Webster's Collegiate. I am sure I should not have raised this question at all -- or should I?

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